Employee engagement: do practitioners care what academics have to say – and should they?

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Employee Engagement: Do Practitioners Care What Academics Have to Say – And Should They?

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1. Introduction

Employee engagement has risen up the agenda of HR practitioners over the past twenty years to become a dominant concern in all sectors (Guest, 2014a). A Google search on the term now yields in excess of 20 million hits and the value of the marketplace for engagement survey providers has been estimated at US$1bn (Bersin, 2015a). One of the reasons for this level of interest in engagement has been the accumulation of evidence accessible to practitioners which suggests that high levels of engagement are associated with a range of beneficial outcomes such as improved performance, profitability and productivity, as well as reduced levels of absenteeism and turnover (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009; Rayton et al., 2012).

In parallel with the rising levels of interest in engagement within the practitioner community, the years since William Kahn (1990) published his seminal academic study on engagement have witnessed a significant growth in engagement research amongst scholars. A recent structured search of academic databases found that 5,771 items had been published during this time (Bailey et al., 2015a).

Given the focus on engagement amongst both practitioners and academics, it would seem that this would be one topic on which there would be scope for a free flow of information between the two communities, and for academic research to reach out to practitioners. However, some

have argued that practitioners have in fact only been influenced to a very limited degree by the work of academics (Guest, 2014b). The purpose of this article is to explore whether this is the case and, if so, to shed light on the divergent interests of academics and practitioners on the topic of engagement, as well as to propose some practical solutions. The article draws on secondary sources and, in response to calls for inviting practitioner perspectives in peer-reviewed articles on the topic (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; Kieser & Leiner, 2011), the article also draws on a small number of interviews conducted with practitioners in the UK purposively selected for their involvement in debates on engagement (Emma Bridger, James Court-Smith, Jonny Gifford and Stephen Harding), which took place during June-July 2015[i].

2. What is the academic-practitioner gap?

It has been widely observed that the interest and focus of practitioners and academics often diverge in important ways that render meaningful dialog and collaboration challenging (Rousseau, 2012; Wensley, 2009). Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) differentiate between scientific knowledge on the one hand which privileges formalized and explicit forms of knowing, and practical knowledge on the other which is intuitive, open-ended and social, and is advanced through the subjective involvement of the individual. Styhre (2013: 293) further distinguishes between p-relevance (practitioner) and s-relevance (social), to underline the point that academic research may have an additional requirement to address issues of pressing social and global significance beyond the bounds of individual organizational or practitioner concerns.

From the perspective of the practitioner, some types of knowledge are likely to be more valuable than others. Three factors emerge as the most salient (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; Panda, 2014; Styhre, 2013). First, knowledge should be presented in a form and language that are

meaningful and comprehensible to a practitioner audience. The accessibility of information to a non-academic is prerequisite for its use and application. One challenge academics may face is making the findings of their research accessible to practitioners.

Second, the knowledge that is presented should be both directly relevant to and applicable within a practical context. In other words, knowledge requires some practical real-world application that might lead to improved outcomes, rather than knowledge that has intrinsic value for its own sake. This again may pose a challenge to academics whose main focus is often on generating and publishing new ideas that build on existing academic frameworks and knowledge, some of which may be highly abstract.

Finally, knowledge should be presented in a timely way so that it is current and addresses present needs, rather than be out of date. A key concern for practitioners is that knowledge should be relevant to pressing business problems they are facing today, and waiting several years for findings to be published, which is often the case for academic research, is often incompatible with the timescales faced by practitioners.

For academic research on engagement to meet the needs of practitioners, these three elements would need to be present to a greater or lesser degree. Part of the issue here, and which will be discussed in more depth later in this article, is the divergence in structures, incentives and norms among the two communities. Whilst academics are incentivized to interrogate existing models and develop new knowledge publishable in journals, consultants, on behalf of their practitioner clients, are interested in improving business practice. The two systems effectively operate as autonomous, self-referential systems governed by divergent norms, time horizons and logics (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; Kieser & Leiner, 2009; Panda, 2014). The socialization forces of the

university on the one hand and the discipline on the other exert pressure on academics that constrain the scope of their strategic choice and channel them towards publication in peer-reviewed journals (Rousseau, 2012). There is a lack of incentive within this system for academics to undertake policy or practice relevant research (Rousseau, 2012; Pfeffer, 2007), with academic publishing becoming an end in itself, often in order to secure tenure or promotion (Janssens & Staeyert, 2009). Science is inherently conservative and there is a tendency to reject papers that disconfirm widely held hypotheses, replicate existing studies or present controversial findings, coupled with a shortage of evidence syntheses, thus limiting the practical relevance of academic studies (Pfeffer, 2007; Briner, 2014). There may therefore be some significant factors the serve to reinforce the academic-practitioner divide which may be pertinent to the sharing of information between the two communities on the topic of engagement.

First, to establish the level of interchange of ideas between the two communities, we undertook secondary research using published sources. In order to evaluate whether academics writing on the topic of engagement are aware of and draw upon practitioner sources, a search was conducted of the ProQuest database in October 2015 for scholarly articles published in peer-reviewed journals on the topic of either "employee engagement" or "work engagement" between January 2014 and October 2015. This yielded a database of 73 articles. The reference lists of these articles were scanned for reference to practitioner materials on the topic of engagement. Of the 73 articles, 21 (29%) made no reference at all to any practitioner sources. 15 (21%) made reference to articles from journals geared towards practitioners such as the *Harvard Business Review* or *Sloan Management Review* which are usually regarded as "bridging" journals between the academic and practitioner communities (Schulz and Nicolai, 2015). Finally, 36 articles (49%) made reference to several practitioner sources such as reports written by consultancy firms or

survey houses, government reports or books or articles written for a practitioner audience. However, even though this would suggest that there is quite a good level of interchange between the two communities, the practitioner sources referred to in the academic studies were generally speaking not used within the central line of argument of these papers but rather performed a peripheral or illustrative function.

A search was also conducted for recent reports written on engagement within the practitioner community. Although this was not a systematic search, 15 substantive reports that were published between 2010-2015 and that were freely available within the public domain were identified. The sources were: the Society for HRM (US), the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (UK), Engage for Success, Corporate Research Forum, Deloitte/Bersin, Dale Carnegie Training, Aon Hewitt, Towers Watson and ORC International. Of the 15 reports, eight made reference to academic research from peer-reviewed journals and academic books, and seven did not. Again, this would suggest a reasonable degree of awareness of academic research amongst the practitioner community. Given the way that the practitioners used the academic sources within their reports, there was some evidence that these sources were being used to develop and inform central lines of argument.

Overall, the review of reference lists would suggest some mutual awareness of studies across the two domains. But to what degree do practitioners and academics enjoy a shared approach to engagement?

3. The meaning, definition and measurement of "engagement"

3.1 Practitioner definitions and measures

Within the practitioner community, engagement is commonly referred to as "employee engagement" and its precise meaning has been the subject of some debate. For example, a report commissioned by the UK government into employee engagement drawing largely on practitioner sources found over 50 different definitions (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009). Broadly, definitions within the practitioner community can be clustered under two main headings.

Engagement as a "mutual gains" workforce management strategy. Several definitions refer to engagement as a strategy for managing the workforce aligned with organizational objectives and aimed at giving rise to attitudinal, affective or behavioral responses on the part of the employee such as commitment, energy or performance, as well as personal wellbeing. For example,

> "Employee engagement is the art and science of engaging people in authentic and recognized connections to strategy, roles, performance, organization, community, relationship, customers, development, energy, and well-being as we leverage, sustain and transform our work connections into results." (http://www.davidzinger.com/zinger-model/. Accessed 17 July 2015)

> "Employee engagement is a workplace approach designed to ensure that employees are committed to their organisation's goals and values, motivated to contribute to organisational success, and are able at the same time to enhance their own sense of well-being." (http://www.engageforsuccess.org/about/what-is-employee-engagement/. Accessed 17 July 2015)

Jonny Gifford of the CIPD defines engagement as "a mutual gains view of the good of the employee and the good of the organization".

Engagement as attitude/behaviors. Engagement is sometimes referred to in terms of the attitudes or behaviors that are expected of an engaged employee. Perhaps the most widely known definitions in the practitioner community are those used by the Gallup organization of engagement as "an individual's involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work" (Harter et al., 2002: 417) and the ORC (undated) definition of engagement as comprising

three facets, "say (willingness to advocate on behalf of the organization), stay (intent to remain with the organization), strive (willingness to exert discretionary effort)". Bersin (2015b) similarly define engagement as: "an employee's job satisfaction, loyalty and inclination to expend discretionary effort toward organizational goals". Among the interviewees, Emma Bridger defines engagement as "the extent to which people are personally involved in the success of their business". Stephen Harding defines it as the alignment between the employee and the goals of the organization, combined with an emotional connection with the organization and a willingness to go the extra mile. James Court-Smith defines it as "identification with the work role".

Measures. Measuring engagement includes two main foci within the practitioner literature. The first is gauging levels of engagement within the workforce as a whole and within individual organizations. The consensus at the workforce level appears to be that engagement levels are too low, creating an "engagement deficit" leading to damaging effects on national productivity and competitiveness (Rayton et al., 2012). Within organizations, the emphasis is often on evaluating levels of engagement generally and then at a more finely grained level of detail, such as by comparing departments, subsidiaries or even teams, to identify areas of high and low engagement. One example of this is the Gallup comparative survey of business units cited in MacLeod & Clarke (2009: 11). A large number of consultancy firms have their own proprietary measures of engagement which they use within organizations to evaluate engagement levels, and many have amassed very significant databases with millions of respondents from a wide range of sectors worldwide. However, not only are the questions used in these types of survey normally proprietary to the firms, but also the methods of analysis and interpretation of results (Fletcher and Robinson, 2014). The Gallup "Q12" survey is perhaps the best known and most widely

adopted measure of engagement worldwide and comprises 12 questions that focus on involvement in, satisfaction with and enthusiasm for work (Harter et al., 2002), including such items as "does my supervisor, or someone at work, seem to care about me as a person?" and "this last year, have I had opportunities at work to learn and grow?" ORC International's "Say-Stay-Strive" measure captures pride and willingness to advocate on behalf of the organization and recommend it as a great place to work; the sense of belonging and positive contribution employees have, their level of commitment and intent to stay; and doing more than is expected, feeling that the organization motivates them to do more at the best level they can (ORC, undated).

Second, there has been a focus on giving organizations advice on how to go about measuring levels of engagement, whether in terms of the type of questions to ask, the most suitable format for seeking information, or the analysis and interpretation of results (Lambert, 2015; Bridger, 2015; Fletcher & Robinson, 2014). For some within the practitioner community, lack of precise measurement may matter less than a gut instinct about how engaged the workforce is. This is summed up by MacLeod and Clarke (2009: 7) when they cite Lord Currie, who said, "you sort of smell it, don't you, that engagement of people as people".

3.2 Academic definitions and measures

Definitions. "Employee engagement" is a contested and evolving construct in the academic domain, and a wide range of definitions and measures have been proposed. Most commonly, engagement is viewed within the psychology literature as a state of mind experienced towards work. The first academic writing on engagement was William Kahn whose seminal (1990: 694) article proposed that personal engagement is the "harnessing of organization members' selves to

their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively and emotionally during role performances".

A recent evidence synthesis of the engagement literature (Bailey et al., 2015) found that by far the most widely adopted definition of engagement in use is that of the Utrecht Group (Schaufeli et al., 2002: 74) who argued that engagement is "a positive, fulfilling, work related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication and absorption". This definition emanates from the positive psychology movement and positions engagement in the context of theories of motivation. Unlike the majority of the writing within the practitioner sphere, academics have situated their discussions of engagement within one or more theoretical frameworks. Those academics using the Utrecht definition most often use the job demands-resources (JD-R) framework to explain engagement; according to this perspective, resources, including personal resources such as resilience, and organizational resources such as well-designed jobs, serve to energize and motivate employees by helping satisfy human needs for autonomy, competence or relatedness, and thereby foster high levels of engagement. Demands, on the other hand, notably "hindrance demands", such as overly intense work, de-energize employees and deplete levels of engagement.

Although the prevalent view among academics writing on the topic of engagement is that it is a psychological state of mind, different viewpoints are starting to emerge. For example, academics within the human resource management field have begun examining engagement as a workforce management strategy. Jenkins and Delbridge (2013) argue that there are two forms of engagement; "Soft" engagement where the focus is on promoting positive workplace conditions and relationships between managers and employees and "hard" engagement, characterized by a focus on increasing employee productivity through engagement activities.

Measures. A key concern for academics has been to find a valid and reliable measure of engagement. Generally, academic scales are freely available in the public domain. The most widely adopted measure is the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale capturing vigor, dedication and absorption as the three facets of engagement (UWES; Schaufeli et al., 2002). The scale has been validated for use in various formats and languages and the most commonly used variants comprise either nine or 17 items, such as "at my work, I feel bursting with energy", "my job inspires me", "time flies when I am working". Several other scales have been developed (eg May et al., 2004; Saks, 2006) but none has been so widely used. However, significant shortcomings have been identified with the extant academic scales, with questions over their validity and reliability, and their distinctiveness from other related constructs (Viljavac et al., 2012; Wefald et al., 2012). For instance, a meta-analysis conducted by Christian et al. (2011) found that engagement shares "conceptual space" with other constructs such as job satisfaction, involvement and organizational commitment. Wefald et al. (2012) were unable to confirm the three-factor structure of the UWES and found that it was not able to predict a range of outcomes when satisfaction and affective commitment were controlled. Relatively few studies have been conducted using qualitative methods but nevertheless researchers are exhibiting a growing interest in diversifying away from the traditional positivistic research designs.

3.3 Comparing practitioner and academic definitions and measures

A number of contrasts emerge between the two communities in their usage of the term. First, the practitioner definitions are often but not always broader in remit, and tend to be less well-specified compared with the academic definitions. It is not necessarily the case that each element of the practitioner definitions is separately operationalized and measured in order to evaluate its presence or strength. Definitions emanating from the field of psychology tend to be very precise

in delineating the exact contours of the construct, thus enabling it to be both operationalized and measured.

Second, the definitions used by practitioners tend to be normative and aspirational (Keenoy, 2014). However, it is worth noting that a wide range of definitions is in use within both communities, not just amongst practitioners, and there is little agreement about a precise definition amongst either. Although there is clear interest in the practitioner community in defining engagement, there appears to be less emphasis on precise definitions, and a greater acceptance that viewpoints will vary. Although this is a pragmatic solution, the difficulties of failing to pinpoint an accurate definition have been highlighted by Briner (2014), who argues that defining a construct is a vital pre-requisite for researching and understanding it. Those definitions and measures that do exist within the practitioner domain have also been subject to criticism due to lack of construct validity (Little & Little, 2006).

However, a prevalent view in the practitioner community seems to be that defining engagement in precise terms is not necessary and may even be counter-productive (Lambert, 2015). James Court-Smith commented, "I don't think the definition of engagement and the specific metric makes a difference … I've seen evidence that each one of them works … it's not the metric that makes the difference, it's how well it's applied, how well it's used." Jonny Gifford said, "I wouldn't subscribe to one definition of employee engagement even though we have defined it as an organization in the past … I think it's healthier to see it as this overarching area in the same way as you wouldn't have a single measure for leadership or employee relations. I think that employee engagement is broader than any one thing". Emma Bridger commented that the lack of agreement over what engagement means, "is an opportunity for

organizations … to think about what it means for them and to come up with a definition that works for them".

Criticisms have equally been levied at the academic construct as well. There has been considerable debate over the validity of the construct of work engagement (Christian et al., 2011). For instance, Purcell (2014: 242) argues that the whole notion of work engagement is conceptually flawed, and notes that "what emerges is a profile of a person so engrossed in work that it can only ever apply to a minority of employees", with the others, ie the majority, viewed in negative terms as partially engaged or disengaged. He argues that we should "disengage" from work engagement in light of its acontextual, individualistic depiction of workplace attitudes that fails to take account of power or conflict.

Meta-analyses have revealed overlaps between engagement and other constructs such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment and involvement, leading to charges of potential concept redundancy (Christian et al., 2011; Cole et al., 2011). Emergent research within the HRM field that focuses on "doing engagement" rather than on "being engaged" (Truss et al., 2013) casts engagement in a very different light and situates it more centrally within longstanding debates in the HRM arena, thus opening the door to alternative ontologies and methodologies in the study of engagement (Jenkins and Delbridge, 2013). To sum up, it is not possible to talk of "the" view of engagement on the part of academics, but rather a plurality of contested views, potentially rendering academic research on the topic, similar to other management topics, confusing and seemingly impenetrable to practitioners (Kieser & Leiner, 2011). Thus, in terms of the knowledge pre-requisite of conveying ideas in a format readily accessible to and usable by practitioners, the academic community may be falling short. However, what is potentially of

great benefit to the practitioner community is the free availability of academic measures and the evidence base leading to their development and validation.

4. Modelling engagement

A major concern for both academics and practitioners has been modelling engagement, or situating it within a broader framework that includes both its antecedents and its consequences.

4.1 Practitioner Models

Practitioners have been concerned with providing models and frameworks that explain the organizational benefits of high levels of employee engagement, as well as outlining the strategies and initiatives that yield higher engagement levels. The majority of the advice is based on a combination of case study evidence that comes either from individual organizations that have put themselves forward as exemplars in the engagement domain, or from consultancies/survey houses that present clients as examples, and from large-scale client surveys. Sometimes, the evidence that these strategies have "worked" in the sense of having raised levels of engagement comes from improvements in the results of engagement surveys, or from performance improvements, as well as simply from managers' impressions that strategies have borne fruit.

Engagement strategies encompass a number of different areas of activity. Bersin (2015a) present a model of five drivers of engagement: meaningful work; hands-on management; positive work environment; growth opportunity and trust in leadership. Their data are based on two years of research and discussions with "hundreds" of clients. ORC (undated) argue, based on data from 7,400 employees from 20 countries, that the drivers of engagement include the nature of the job itself; senior managers; feeling valued; and feeling empowered. Those drivers advocated by Engage for Success build on the strategies presented in the MacLeod and Clarke

(2009: 75) report and fall under four headings: leadership with a strong strategic narrative; engaging line managers; employee voice; organizational integrity. Consultancy firm Kenexa found that perceptions of senior managers, quality of relations with line managers, training and development and work-life balance were associated with high levels of engagement (Kenexa, 2012). The CIPD (Lewis et al., 2011) found eleven management competencies associated with engagement grouped under the following headings: supporting employee growth; interpersonal style and integrity; and monitoring direction. Thus, practitioner publications have identified a wide range of factors that appear relevant to raised levels of engagement, with some considerable divergence between the various models.

Equally, practitioner models focus on uncovering evidence that high levels of engagement are associated with beneficial outcomes, mainly for organizations in terms of profitability, performance or productivity, but also for individuals such as wellbeing or low levels of absenteeism (Harter et al., 2002). For example, Rayton et al. (2012) cites one study from Gallup (2006) with data from over 23,000 business units which showed those in the top 25% in terms of levels of engaged workers achieved on average 18% higher productivity compared with the lowest 25%. The overwhelming weight of evidence that is presented to practitioners highlights the positive outcomes associated with engagement. Indeed, I am not aware of any practitioner publication that indicates any negative or even neutral outcomes at all. Although the authors of reports such as these often are at pains to point out that their evidence indicates correlation rather than causation (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009), the argument is generally made that it is the overall weight of evidence that lends support to the notion that engagement leads to higher levels of performance, with some making strong claims for significant performance effects.

4.2 Academic models

Do academics writing on engagement address the kinds of issues that are of interest to practitioners? Within the academic community, there is evidence that similar questions about the antecedents and consequences of engagement have been asked. The breadth and complexity of antecedent factors was demonstrated in a recent narrative evidence synthesis which grouped antecedents under five headings (Bailey et al., 2015). Individual psychological states, including for instance self-efficacy and resilience, optimism and empowerment were found to be linked to engagement (Heuven et al., 2006; Mendes & Stander, 2011). The second set of factors clustered around job design, and here a range of job resources such as supervisory and colleague support, feedback and autonomy were associated positively with engagement (e.g., Bakker et al., 2007; Idris et al., 2011), whilst job-related demands, notably those classified as hindrances rather than challenges, were generally, but not always, linked with lowered engagement levels (e.g., De Braine & Roodt, 2011).

Third, perceptions of leadership and management were associated with engagement in a number of studies (e.g., Karatepe, 2012; Tims et al., 2011). Factors at the organizational or team level have also been examined and found relevant for engagement, including organizational identification, positive perceptions of HR practices and team-level engagement (He et al., 2013; Alfes et al., 2013; Bakker et al., 2006).

Finally, a very small number of studies examined the link between organizational interventions and engagement, including for instance training and development programmes and new ways of working (e.g., Brummelhuis et al., 2012; Carter et al., 2010), but the findings of these studies have been somewhat inconclusive. There has been some limited consideration of

how engagement strategies interrelate with wider more collaborative approaches to employment relations such as in a unionized setting (Purcell, 2014). Townsend et al. (2013) found that engagement strategies can co-exist with collectivist voice approaches but that the benefits from increasing engagement can be undermined in a context of poor or hostile union relations. In the US, only 11.1% of employees belong to a union (Modernsurvey, 2015), however, it was found that although engagement levels of unionized and non-unionized workers are very similar, unionized workers are less likely to quit, revealing a complex relationship between unionization and engagement. Of a total of 155 studies that examined antecedents of engagement included in the evidence synthesis, only nine considered individual responses to organizational interventions aimed at raising engagement levels, which arguably is the area that is of most interest to practitioners (Bailey et al., 2015b).

From an HRM perspective, it is also worth considering how the debate about engagement relates to earlier and more established discussions about related constructs such as high-involvement work practices. Rana (2015) argues that engagement can be positioned as an outcome of four types of high involvement work practices, namely, empowerment, the provision of information, reward and recognition, and resources and opportunities to improve knowledge and skills.

Although much of the academic research thus far has relied on cross-sectional methods which make the inference of causality difficult, there have nonetheless been a number of studies that have used more complex methods such as longitudinal surveys, diary studies, intervention analyses or the use of multiple informants which have proven to be more robust and indicative of causality (e.g., Karatepe, 2012; Cheng et al., 2013; Bledlow et al., 2011; Ouweneel et al., 2012). As this brief overview shows, scholars have identified a very wide range of factors that appear to

act as antecedents to engagement. This can be summed up by saying that positive antecedents such as job resources, positive psychological states and positive perceptions of leaders, managers and organizations tend to be associated with higher levels of engagement, whereas negative perceptions of these, together with excessive demands, have been found to be linked with lower levels of engagement.

In terms of outcomes, academic studies have found, at the individual level, that high levels of engagement are associated with positive attitudinal outcomes such as health, wellbeing, morale, job and life satisfaction and commitment (e.g., Freeney & Fellenz, 2013; Hu & Schaufeli, 2011; Biswas & Bhatnager, 2013). Other studies have demonstrated a negative link between engagement and poor health outcomes, stress and burnout (e.g., Hallberg & Schaufeli, 2006; Buys & Rothmann, 2010). Research has also generally shown a link between engagement and higher levels of performance at the individual, unit, team and organizational levels (e.g., Salanova et al., 2005; Van Bogaert et al., 2013; Leung et al., 2011), and between engagement and extra-role performance such as citizenship behavior or knowledge sharing (e.g., Rich et al., 2010; Chen et al., 2011). Engagement has been negatively associated with counterproductive or deviance behaviors in a few studies (eg, Den Hartog & Belshak, 2012). Beyond this, there has been some limited consideration of the potentially negative outcomes of high levels of engagement such as impaired work-life balance (Halbesleben, 2011) and income inequality (George, 2011) but this aspect of the topic remains under-developed.

4.3 Comparing practitioner and academic models

There is considerable evidence that both practitioner and academic communities have a core concern with modelling how engagement sits in relation to various antecedents and outcomes.

Some of the findings concerning engagement "drivers" are common across both communities, for instance, in terms of the importance of leadership and management style or job design, and the general point that engagement is associated with positive individual and organizational outcomes has been made by both constituencies.

However, evidence that the findings of practitioner studies are being influenced by academic research is limited. Many of the studies conducted by survey houses and consultancies draw heavily on models developed in-house using questionnaires designed with the laudable aim of meeting clients' needs, rather than using established or validated academic scales from with the academic literature. Unfortunately, using too many of these would render the surveys too lengthy for regular use in an organizational setting. Briner (2014) raises concerns about over-claiming and mis-claiming on the basis of such evidence that is not subject to external scrutiny and review in the same way as academic research, a point borne out by some of the interviewees. Broader issues of the employment relationship also remain unanswered and unaddressed in much of the practitioner literature on engagement, with the implicit assumption being that employees both want to be and ought to be engaged, without consideration of power, political or collectivist standpoints (Purcell, 2014). As Guest (2014b) asks, what is in it for the employee to become more highly engaged? Critical, negative or even neutral standpoints are rarely considered or presented and the employee risks being relegated to the role of passive recipient of workplace strategies (Purcell, 2014).

Given the evident sharing of interests, why has there not been more attention paid to academic models? Part of the reason may lie in the fact that the academic roots of the field of engagement rest within the positive psychology movement and its focus on optimal human functioning (Youssef-Morgan & Bockorny, 2014). Most of the theorizing around engagement as we saw

earlier draws on the job demands-resources framework (JD-R) to "explain" engagement, (Demerouti et al., 2001). This line of reasoning clearly has relevance to practitioners, but the resulting models and academic studies that build on this viewpoint perhaps suffer from a narrowness of perspective and focus on incremental advancements in knowledge that limit their practical usefulness to practitioners, alongside their limited consideration of important contextual and organizational factors.

5. Reasons for the academic-practitioner divide

Given that there appears to be some evidence of split perspectives, it is important to try to understand the reasons behind this. To a large extent, these issues are not specific to engagement, as Stephen Harding commented, and can be understood within the context of wider debates about evidence-based management (Briner, 2014) and the so-called rigor-vs-relevance gap (Kieser & Leiner, 2009). Broadly, the reasons can be considered under four headings: factors specific to engagement; communication; evidence; and incentives.

The first set of reasons coalesces around the theme of the lack of relevance of academic research on engagement to the concerns of practitioners, a point that has been made in the context of business school research in general (Khurana & Spender, 2012). James Court-Smith identified two aspects to this. First, he noted, "I think practitioners are looking for help with their deployment activities and academics are making progress around the concepts … so for that reason what practitioners are looking for is not yet what the academic research is focused on". Instead, practitioners perceive that academics are more interested in debating the meaning of engagement than in engagement strategies. To a large extent, this perception is true, given the small number of studies that have looked at employee responses to engagement programmes.

However, the large number of high-quality studies that examine the antecedents of engagement (Bailey et al., 2015b) may well offer insights that could inform the design of engagement strategies, if practitioners were made aware of them. Allied to this is a failure to articulate the practical implications arising from study findings. Jonny Gifford argued that this element of academic research papers tends to be "very vague", and lacking in the detail necessary for practitioners.

The second issue concerns the general tenor of academic debate on the topic of engagement. James Court-Smith referred in particular to the tendency for members of the academic community to criticize practitioners for drawing on low-quality research, or no research at all, in designing their engagement interventions:

> "It would be nice to be offering some solutions, not just pointing the finger … you know, if the field of study hasn't yet resolved on what the concept is and how best to define it … to criticize others that are going ahead and having to do it anyway when the evidence isn't there is in my mind quite disappointing."

The prevailing norms of academic debate and discussion in the development of an emergent field such as engagement thus appear arcane and irrelevant to those charged with implementation, and may provoke a defensive stance on the part of practitioners that could serve to reinforce barriers between the two communities.

Finally, the interviewees also noted that much academic research on engagement is incremental and contributes very little to knowledge, thereby side-stepping the "big picture" questions that are so crucial in the practitioner world. Jonny Gifford added that academic debates could be perceived as "splitting hairs" by practitioners. James Court-Smith summed up the

implications of this by saying that: "whether or not the measure is exactly precise, part of the reason why I think that's less relevant, is because I don't have a scalpel anyway". In other words, in the messy reality of the organization, there is little scope for very accurate interventions and so measuring engagement perfectly is just not that relevant. Academics were additionally perceived as "behind the curve" (Jonny Gifford) on current business dilemmas such as the use of social media in engagement, thus failing to address practitioners' need for the timely resolution of current issues.

All four interviewees remarked that it is important for the practitioner community to know about academic research in order to foster an evidence-based approach to engagement. By and large, they laid the blame for practitioners' lack of awareness of research at the door of academia. Specifically, they argued that academics communicate their ideas using complex jargon that is impenetrable to most intelligent practitioners. Emma Bridger commented: "academia is a completely different tone of voice and style and it's very exclusive … I'm from the academic world and sometimes I have to read stuff three or four times to understand what on earth it's saying." Forums for communication were also mentioned, with the interviewees stating that it was rare to find conferences or other events that brought academics and practitioners together, and that academics often fail to communicate their findings outside the confines of peer-reviewed journals, thus limiting the potential to reach practitioners. The danger, according to Emma Bridger, is that academics become perceived as inhabiting an ivory tower divorced from business realities.

Third, it is apparent that the two communities generally consider "evidence" and "knowledge" in quite different lights. Academic standards of reliability and validity together with transparency over datasets and analyses that are prerequisite for publishing in peer-reviewed journals are

applied either sparingly or not at all within the practitioner literature, which normally privileges case study examples reliant on organizational viewpoints on the one hand, and large-scale datasets using undisclosed methodologies and measures on the other, often presented with an emphasis on emotion and inspiration rather than fact (Styhre, 2013). While academics would lend considerable weight to methodology and theory in evaluating the quality of research findings, practitioners are likely to focus more on the practical implications. Scientific progress depends on the constant modification and development of existing knowledge, theories and methods whereas organizations, which are practice-based systems, are likely to develop new ideas through observation, intuition and experience (Kieser & Leiner, 2009).

Van de Ven and Johnson (2006) argue that the epistemological status of practical knowledge needs to be understood as a distinct mode of knowing in its own right as a transactional, open-ended and inherently social mode that yields knowledge critical to effective practical action. Although different from scientific knowledge, both can be regarded as valid bearing in mind their different purposes. They argue that most calls for academics to put their ideas into practice and for practitioners to put their practices into theory are based on the flawed assumption that a literal transfer from one domain to the other is possible. A more pluralistic view however sees the two domains as distinct kinds of knowledge that can provide complementary insights.

That said, the quality of academic research outputs is itself not uniform, with varying standards applied across journals. Similarly, there is research of good quality to be found within the practitioner community; Purcell (2014) cites research conducted by the IPA (Dromey, 2014) within the UK National Health Service as an example of this, and studies by the Gallup organization have appeared in highly ranked peer-reviewed journals (Harter et al., 2002). Many consulting and survey firms employ people with PhDs and Master's degrees, while business

schools have an increasing tendency to employ individuals with a background in practice; the notion of a neat binary divide between academics and practitioners is therefore perhaps misleading.

The final barrier related to incentives and priorities within the two communities as discussed earlier (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014). Stephen Harding summed this up:

> "What good consultancies do is they come up with a concept which is empirically robust but also has meaning and value for their clients. Their model becomes a reference point and of course it will evolve … but will it get micro-analyzed in the same way as it would among academics? Well the simple answer is that it doesn't because there's not the same pressure to do so. The pressures for consultants and academics are different, it does not mean that their work is any less valid or useful … the drivers of business are to do with market growth, client satisfaction, profitability … and in academia what you're concerned about of course is writing papers and books, presenting at conferences and again keeping ahead of the game but you're not trying to produce a profit directly from the academic work that you're doing and that's a very different mindset."

When asked if they could think of some examples of good practice in terms of academics and practitioners working together around engagement, the interviewees could think of very few instances. Some specific academics (not necessarily working on engagement) were cited as exemplars of how to communicate effectively with a practitioner audience, and two examples of effective research collaborations were cited, reflecting the findings of wider studies on effective collaborative projects (Wensley, 2009). Commentators have generally been pessimistic about

existing efforts to develop more collaborative approaches to research such as action research or "mode 2" research, which are felt to have met with limited success in terms of either practical outputs or journal publications (Kieser & Leiner, 2009; Bartunek & Rynes, 2014).

The four interviewees expressed a range of views about the usefulness of academic research on engagement. Whilst James Court-Smith echoed the views of Guest (2014a) in commenting that practitioners do not make much use of research and said "I've read quite a lot of academic papers … they're intellectually stimulating but it's so far removed from what's happening in practice that I don't think the two speak to each other at the moment", Jonny Gifford remarked that academic studies can be "hugely useful" for practitioners as part of a general movement towards evidence-based management. However, he felt that its use amongst practitioners was often confined to certain sectors such as health care. Emma Bridger, who has a background in psychology, reported making extensive use of academic research in the development of her ideas and used this to underpin presentations to clients, whilst being mindful not to overload them with academic theories and jargon. However, she also commented, "companies could use the Utrecht scale for example, but they choose to go to a big consulting house and pay a fortune for it."

6. The academic-practitioner divide: does it matter?

Within the wider HRM community, there have been calls for an increased focus on evidence-based approaches in light of an ongoing reliance on faulty practices and decision-making based on anecdotal evidence, tradition, and personal preferences (Briner et al., 2009). Evidence based HRM has been defined as "a decision-making process combining critical thinking with the use of best available scientific evidence and business information" (Rousseau & Barends, 2011: 221). This call has been based on the view that academic research has become self-serving and too far

removed from practice, and has been accompanied by the suggestion that business school academics should model themselves more closely on other professional counterparts such as lawyers, doctors or engineers who have established more effective practical linkages (Rousseau, 2012).

Although the aim of closer alignment between the worlds of academia and practice is laudable, this does need to be situated within a broader perspective rather than seen as a purely binary divide. Practitioners do not speak "with one voice" any more than do academics; as Boxall and Purcell (2011) argue, employers have multiple and sometimes conflicting goals that go beyond short-term financial gain. Consultants, policymakers, line managers, and HR professionals will all have divergent views and interests (Keenoy, 2014). For academics to address the needs of practitioners requires a nuanced understanding of the perspectives of the different stakeholder groups. Beyond this, it has been argued that academics have a wider moral and social responsibility in adopting a critical, reflexive and objective standpoint, and in fostering the development of pluralist accounts of organizational practice (Janssens & Steyaert, 2009; Kieser & Leiner, 2009). The danger is that moving away from questions of legitimacy, power and control to questions based around 'best practice' organizational systems can have negative consequences for scholarship (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014). The recent financial crisis has highlighted the important role that academic objectivity has to play in the face of the drive for short-term financial gains (Clark et al., 2013). Nonetheless, there is clearly scope for academic research to be both more visible to and influential within the business community.

7. Discussion and recommendations

The gap between academic and practitioner perspectives on engagement emerges as part of a general lacuna between academics and practitioners within business research more widely (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014). Pfeffer (2007) shows that of the world's 50 most influential management innovations such as lean manufacturing, none originated in academia. Kieser and Leiner (2009: 529) pessimistically conclude that it is a "false hope" that academics and practitioners can collaborate to produce research in the face of systems incompatibility. Nonetheless, it would be a shame to give up on this project and there are some practical steps that can be taken.

First, academics need to ensure their material is presented "in a tone of voice and style that works for practitioners" (Emma Bridger), making their work easily accessible (Stephen Harding). Of course, this may not be practical when writing for peer-reviewed journals, so targeting alternative outlets that practitioners are more likely to consult such as specialist websites, newspapers, reports, and practitioner journals with shortened versions of articles and even Twitter, webcasts and podcasts are alternatives to consider. In presenting material, practitioners are less interested in theoretical frameworks, methodology, statistical analysis, study limitations and caveats than an academic audience, and more interested in key findings, examples, and practical implications, according to the four interviewees. Such communications of research findings do not have to be instead of academic publications but can be in addition to them.

Second, academic studies such as meta-analyses, literature reviews or evidence syntheses that bring together and interrogate research findings from a number of sources have the potential to

appeal more to busy practitioners than individual incremental studies (Emma Bridger). Academics may therefore wish to consider supplementing their primary data collection with such overarching reviews which are not only publishable in peer-reviewed outlets but also in practitioner journals and websites.

Third, breaking down barriers between academics and practitioners involves opportunities for dialog and debate (Stephen Harding), and the chance to get to know one another at a personal level. Emma Bridger explained that academics need to work on their image and show "they're not these super intelligent creatures who have no experience of the real world, they are actually normal people … that have got a lot to offer." Events such as conferences or workshops that bring together academics and practitioners provide good opportunities for this (Panda, 2014).

Fourth, the closer collaboration of academics and practitioners around research will help bridge the divide. There have been some examples of consortium-funded research projects that have led to outputs relevant to both academics and practitioners, including the UK based Kingston Engagement Consortium (Soane et al., 2012; Truss et al., 2010). Such projects are extremely challenging to set up and run effectively to meet the needs of all constituencies, and it is essential to have an academic team with a wide range of skills involved to make it a success. Other approaches include establishing a research project advisory board that includes practitioners, seeking their input on study design and dissemination and collaborating with professional and industry sector bodies in developing and conducting research studies. At any rate, more organizationally-based research that considers the contextual setting of research studies would be welcome in convincing practitioners that academics have an understanding of the realities they face.

Finally, the development of research topics and questions that address the needs of practitioners is also necessary (McGrath, 2007). Although some have argued that there may be the risk of being steered towards narrow or short-term questions, it is possible to work collaboratively in teams to design questions that promote "concilience", integrating fragmented perspectives into a wider appreciation of the fundamental issues (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006). Allied with this is a need for practitioners to move away from highly specialist topics towards broader and more holistic questions that address the realities of organizational life (James Court-Smith). It is possible within this context to design research studies that meet the needs of all parties; peer-reviewed publications are likely to be essential for early career academics working on the project, policymakers may be interested in generalizable findings and organizations may be seeking specific recommendations. A carefully designed study containing several data collection strands and research instruments that address multiple objectives is feasible.

There are therefore some practical steps that academics can take to disseminate their research findings to a practitioner audience, stimulate the use of findings in an organizational setting, and to collaborate with practitioners in the design, conduct and dissemination of research, whilst still maintaining objectivity and reflexivity within the research process.

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